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THE GREAT CITY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA[1]

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ABSTRACT

A major characteristic of urbanization in Southeast Asia is the functional dominance, with two minor exceptions, of one great metropolis in each of the countries of the region. These cities have acted as the head-links between the West and the indigenous societies. They are in a state of rapid social change, associated with the granting of political autonomy to the former colonial nations, with the accelerated rise of nationalism, and the increasing centralization of political functions in the national capitals.

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Standards for defining urban populations differ, but it can be assumed safely that no more than 15 per cent of the 175 million people of Southeast Asia belong in an urban category.[2] In contrast, in the United States, with a population somewhat smaller than that of Southeast Asia as a whole, over 64 per cent of the population is classified as urban.

Estimates for 1952 indicate only 30 cities or urban agglomerations with populations of 100,000 or more.[3] In the United States, however, there are 160 such urban areas; in the Soviet Union, with a population of 200 millions, there are about 120; and in Japan, with one-half the population of Southeast Asia, there are 64. In Southeast Asia only an estimated 7 per cent of the total population lives in cities of 100,000 or more; less in Burma, Indochina, Thailand, and Indonesia; somewhat more in the Philippines. Only Malaya, including Singapore, departs

[1] Revised from a paper read before the Far Eastern Association in Spring, 1954.

[121] As used here, "urbanization" connotes not only mere numerical increases in the population of cities but also the development of an urban way of life and the accompanying changes in value orientation (cf. Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," *American Journal of Sociology*, July, 1938).

[2] Census data for Southeast Asia are notably incomplete. In Burma, Thailand, and the Associated States of Indochina the "urban" population is estimated to be little more than 10 per cent of the whole; in Indonesia still less; but in the Philippines some 24 per cent of the population is classified as urban; and in Malaya, including the Crown Colony of Singapore, about 35 per cent. Without Singapore, only 27 per cent of the Malayan population is classified as urban.

[113] [3] *United Nations Demographic Yearbook, 1952.*

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significantly from the norm, with 18 per cent of its population living in large urban clusters. In the United States, on the other hand, nearly 30 per cent of the population lives in such large cities.

Southeast Asia retains many characteristics of a frontier region, with large areas of sparse population, and so it seems paradoxical that its population density is 95 per square mile, as compared with 50 in the United States, 23 in the Soviet Union, and 617 in Japan. Clearly there is no single correlation between densities and urbanization. The explanation lies in the structure of the urban hierarchy within the region. Whereas in the United States there is a notable gradation of cities from larger to smaller, and only 18 per cent of the urban population lives in cities of one million population or more, in Southeast Asia the urban population is most clearly associated with the largest cities. For example, in Thailand, half of the urban population lives in one metropolis, Bangkok, and the rest is distributed among a large number of smaller cities and towns, the largest of which contains no more than 35,000 people. Bangkok, therefore, may be regarded as a true Primate City, that is, a city with many times the population of the next largest city and a multiplicity of functions and attractions which give it dominance.[4] The Primate City is characteristic of the so-called "great cities" in Southeast Asia, with few exceptions.[5] Such are, in

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[4] Mark Jefferson, "The Law of the Primate City," *Geographical Review*, April, 1939.

[5] For an excellent description of several of these great cities upon which this paper is based in part see D. W. Fryer, "The 'Million City' in Southeast Asia," *Geographical Review*, October, 1953.

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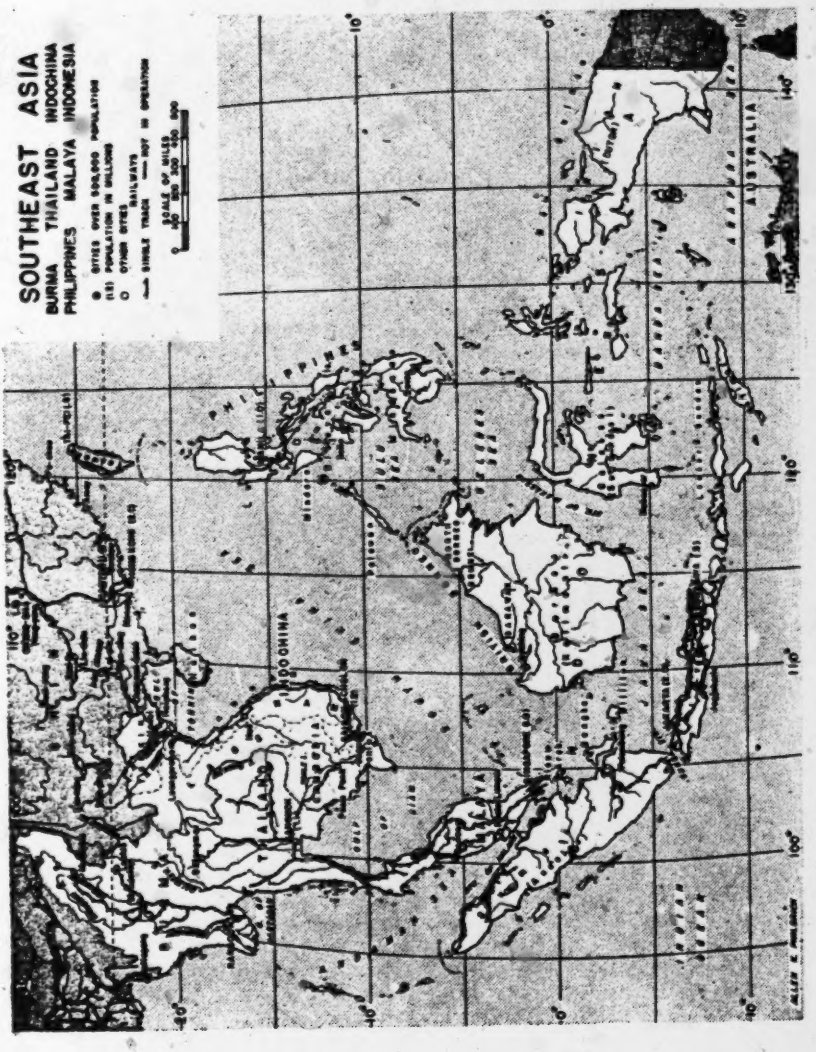

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Burma, Rangoon; in Thailand, Bangkok; in the Philippines, Manila; and in Malaya, Singapore. In Indochina, however, there are two major core regions, each with its regional capital, but Saigon is clearly dominant over Hanoi, which for reasons of population size alone must be regarded as a lesser city.[6] In Indonesia densely populated Java has two large cities, Jakarta and Surabaya, the first only twice the size of the second, but Jakarta is the Primate City, if less clearly than Bangkok or Rangoon. In each case, other than Indonesia, the Primate City is from five to ten times as large as the next largest city, and there is no such graded hierarchy of urbanization as in the United States and to a considerable degree in Western European countries and Japan. Secondary cities, such as Mandalay in Burma, Makassar and Jogjakarta in Indonesia, and Cebu in the Philippines, tend to be regional capitals subordinate to a great metropolis.

The rapid population growth of the six greatest metropolitan centers—Rangoon, Bangkok, Saigon, Manila, Singapore, and Jakarta—suggest that national urbanization may be proceeding as rapidly in Southeast Asia as in any other part of the world.[7] This may be true, but it can be argued also that the overwhelming dominance of the Primate City inhibits the growth of lesser cities and that the largest cities will expand more rapidly than the lesser ones.[8] There are in effect only a limited number of services to be performed by cities within a predominantly village and folk society, although it may be industrializing slowly, and the great cities continue to possess a virtual monopoly of these services. Thus, even as a society changes, new and increasingly complex functions tend to be performed by institutions

[6] According to the *Annuaire statistique du Vietnam, 1949–50*, the population of Hanoi was 216,900 in 1950. Its port, Haiphong, had a population of 146,000. The total population of the two is only about one-fifth that of the twin cities of Saigon-Cholon.

[7] Between 1939 and 1948 the population of Greater Manila increased by 55 per cent. Between 1931 and 1947 the population of Singapore Town (now City) increased by 52.5 per cent.

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178 already established in the Primate cities. So, to a very large degree, in Southeast Asia
162 growth is primarily in the great cities,[9]
369 whereas in the United States in the last three decades at least growth has been more
361 rapid in the small and intermediate cities.

Although the rates of urbanization are high, being, in the case of the Philippines nearly twice the rate of population growth,[10] no sudden transformation to an urbanized society can be envisaged. The percentage of total population classified as urban is in general so low and the normal rates of population increase so high that the growth of urban population *as a percentage of total population* has not been spectacular. In the Philippines, for example, the urban population increased merely from 23.3 per cent in 1939 to 24.1 per cent in 1948, largely in the Manila area. The apparent positive correlation between social change and rates of urban population growth also is exceptionally high. To illustrate with a negative example, in Thailand, where recent social change has been minimal, the rapid population growth of Bangkok has been equaled and even exceeded by that of a number of rural *changwats* in the central and southeastern parts of the country. Under at least two conditions, however, the great cities have increased their populations enormously and at shocking rates: (1) where enlarged political functions have been acquired since the war and (2) where rural unrest and insecurity have

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[9] The only apparent major exception to this generalization is Singapore and Malaya, where the lesser towns have tended to increase their populations equally rapidly since 1931. This situation may be explained by the special political and economic status of Singapore, the entrepôt for much of archipelagic Southeast Asia, and the exceptional degree of commercialization in the Malayan economy as a whole (see M. V. del Tufo, *A Report on the 1947 Census of Population [Malaya, Comprising the Federation of Malaya and the Colony of Singapore]* [London, 1949]).

[9] E.g., Greater Manila accounted for 89 per cent of the 1939–48 growth of the seven largest cities in the Philippines.

[10] Between 1939 and 1948 the approximate rate of total population growth was 20 per cent; that of urban population growth, nearly 40 per cent.

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178 caused or hastened a flight to the relative
162 security of the city. These forces have been
369 operating in combination particularly in
361 Rangoon, Jakarta, Saigon, and Manila and largely are responsible for their extremely rapid postwar growth. Lesser cities in Java, for example, such as Surabaya, Jogjakarta, Semarang, and Surakarta, also have increased in population because of rural insecurity; and in Burma in several towns and cities up to 50 per cent of the population has been resident less than four years, for the same reasons. These migrations have not, however, necessarily been accompanied by greater employment opportunities and consequently cannot be regarded as indexes of more rapid urbanization and associated socioeconomic change.

184 The great cities of Southeast Asia possess
361 many features in common, not the least of
369 which is their youth. This quality they share also with several of the great cities of the United States, but there the resemblance
175 ceases.[11] In 1800 Rangoon, Saigon, and
178 Singapore did not yet exist in city form; Bangkok, the new capital of Thailand, was less than twenty years old; Manila and Batavia (Jakarta), though then about two hundred years old, were merely small coastal towns. They began to grow rapidly after the middle of the nineteenth century, as a consequence of the development of the treaty ports in China, the opening of Japan, the transfer of power from the East India Company to the British Crown by the Queen's Proclamation of 1858, the opening of the

[11] For the most part the growth of the Southeast Asian cities was not associated with a total transformation of society but with a strong indigenous tradition, as in the case of Bangkok, or with the juxtaposition of a segment of a new civilization alongside the old, as in the case of Rangoon. In America the cities represented the culmination of a social transformation in a virtually unoccupied frontier region. The same is true of Manchuria, the northeastern frontier of pioneer settlement in China, which is more recently, and more highly, urbanized than any other part of China. In Manchuria, as in the United States, there is a quite regular gradation of city sizes, and the Primate City cannot be clearly identified.

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Suez Canal in 1869, and the consolidation of Western control, direct or indirect, over most of Southeast Asia in the 1890's, followed by American acquisition of the Philippines at the turn of the century.

More important, the great cities were, and to a large degree still are, foreign creations, essentially alien to the Southeast Asian landscape. Although several began as native settlements, they developed as foreign exclaves on the margins of Asia, in much the same way as did the plantation system and mining operations. With the exception of Bangkok, they represented and functioned as the overseas appendages of Western, not indigenous, interests, being what Spate has called "head-links"—the gates by which Western concepts entered to destroy and build and in which a new system of economic organization evolved.[12] Indeed, the concept of the Asian plural society was inspired by the contrast between the basically foreign great city and the indigenous agricultural village. The ties of the great city with its hinterland were primarily commercial and associated with foreign-controlled mining and plantation interests and with Chinese-dominated rice trade. Such direct political-administrative ties as did exist were restricted primarily to indigenous elites, small in number, which allied themselves with Western interests. Where the indigenous rural populations were affected by these urban-rural relations, it was primarily through the plantation or the mining system, both of which needed a large labor force, or through Indian or Chinese intermediaries.

On the other hand, the relations between an indigenous capital, like Bangkok in its earlier period, or Kyoto or Peking, and the agrarian society upon which it was based were of quite a different order. In these cases the capital represented the culmination of what might be termed a national *ethos*, the epitome of what Redfield has

[12] O. H. K. Spate, "Factors in the Development of Capital Cities," *Geographical Review*, October 1942, p. 628.

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called the "Great Tradition" in an agrarian society.[13]

The links between country and city in this basically feudal relationship were clear, consecutive, and relatively simple to define. To be sure, the villager would regard the capital as a different world from his own, but it was nevertheless a largely comprehensible world, if associated with abstractions and refinements beyond his immediate ken.[14] The modern great city of Southeast Asia, however, not only was different but was also incomprehensible to the child of the folk society, who came to regard it not merely as strange and foreign but also as hostile. The "foreignness" is reflected in their ethnic composition. Until the second World War at least the largest population group in Rangoon was Indian; Singapore is primarily a Chinese city; Bangkok is very largely Chinese, as is Saigon if Cholon, its twin city, is included; both Manila and Jakarta have large foreign and Chinese elements. To this extent the great city is more metropolitan than national. Each has its Chinese, European, and native quarters, for example, although in many instances the lines of division have become blurred, especially since the close of the war.[15] Furthermore, wherever Chinese populations are large, a predominant type of house is the so-called "shophouse," a two-or-more-story building with shops on the first floor, built to a standard width originally dictated by the length of the average fir-log lintel as used in South China, and with residential flats and

[13] See Robert Redfield and Milton Singer, "A Cultural Role of Cities," a working paper for the Conference on the Role of Cities in Economic Growth and Cultural Change, University of Chicago, May 24–26, 1954.

[14] Cf. J. M. van der Kroef, "The Indonesian City: Its Culture and Evolution," *Asia*, March, 1953.

[15] In Singapore the Chinese are localised according to the various so-called "clans," e.g., Hokkien, Cantonese, Tiuchiu, Hailams, and Hakka (see B. W. Hodder, "Racial Groupings in Singapore," *Malayan Journal of Tropical Geography*, October, 1953).

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cubicles behind and above.[15] Usually constructed in continuous rows and back to back, this type of tenement is among the more conspicuous evils in Southeast Asian cities. On the urban peripheries and wherever interstices appear in the modern street and housing pattern, slum villages appear which consist of house clusters usually constructed of bamboo and *atap* palm, highly inflammable and unsanitary.[17] These also are found in and on the margins of the lesser cities but are most striking in juxtaposition to the sleek boulevards of Singapore, Bangkok, and Jakarta.

A further index of the cultural and economic pluralism of the great cities is their frequent division into old and new towns. In China, especially in the treaty ports, this distinction is usually between an old Chinese and a modern foreign city. The same is true of India. In Southeast Asia the contrast is most often between an old and a modern town, both of Western origin, as in Jakarta, Manila, Singapore, and Rangoon. To a notable degree each of these is also a planned city. In Saigon the contrast is between predominantly Chinese Cholon and Saigon itself. In Bangkok, however, there are the old Siamese castle town, a new town of indigenous origin, though of European design, and a Chinese town or quarter nearly as old as the castle town itself. Pluralism is seen not merely in the division of a city into old and new parts or into quarters but also in the separation of the predominantly outward-oriented great city from an up-coun-

[15] For a description of the "shophouse" see R. H. Hughes, "Hong Kong: An Urban Study," *Geographical Journal*, March, 1951, pp. 9–10.

[17] These areas, the so-called "kampongs," are historically enclaves of the countryside within the city. They form small social cells which together cover most of the surface area in and on the margins of the great cities. Separately, they constitute the rural villages, which in the densely settled portions of Java, for example, are so closely spaced that they collectively exhibit population densities as high as those in many cities (see photographs in J. M. Fraser, "Town Planning and Housing in Singapore," *Town Planning Review*, January, 1953).

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try, indigenous, cultural or political sub-center. Just as Shanghai had its Nanking and Peking, so Rangoon has its Mandalay, Jakarta its Jogjakarta, Manila its Cebu, and, in a variant form, Singapore its Kuala Lumpur.

In the past these cities sited along the Asian littoral have been the funnels through which produce from the interiors have reached tidewater and the world of commerce and Western manufactures have penetrated. Through the increasingly metropolitan channels have flowed the ideas of the West as well as its material goods. In a sense they have acted both as a catalyst for social and economic change and as a cushion which modified the shock of the earlier cultural contacts.

With the exception of Singapore, the site of each of the great cities of Southeast Asia is an ill-drained riverine or coastal lowland strategically placed in relation to an exceptionally productive agricultural region. Again, with the exception of Singapore, none possesses a deep natural harbor suitable for modern ocean-going shipping. The three mainland ports are both river and ocean ports and must be reached through tortuous and shallow river channels. All are entrepôts. Jakarta and Manila are located on the most highly developed islands of the archipelagoes, for which they act as entrepôts. Only in Indonesia and Indochina are there major competitors for the two greatest ports —Haiphong, the outlet for the densely populated Tonkin delta, and Surabaya, the regional capital for the Great East of the Indies, itself an empire. Each great port virtually dominates the national import trade; all tend, however, to share some part of the national export trade with lesser ports. In spite of these great similarities, the nature and functions of the ports differ markedly. As Allen observes: "All ports are individual. History, geography, politics, and economics all contribute to making them as they are. Few universal principles apply, and attempts to force uniformity on ports which have grown up differently are bound to fail."[18] Singapore, for example, is one of the

504 world's great ports and the most Western of
361 the great cities of Southeast Asia. A Crown Colony, it is the only great city without a large administrative hinterland, although it is the seat of the British High Commissioner
[175] for Southeast Asia. Since its founding by Raffles in 1819, it has been a free port and an entrepôt for much of archipelagic Southeast Asia. About half of the 5.5 million tons of cargo that pass over Singapore's modern wharves originates outside of the Malayan peninsula, and it was not until 1924 that the island of Singapore was connected by causeway with the mainland. At the same time it handles two-thirds of Malaya's exports and about three-fourths of its imports by value. Increasingly, its interests have tended to focus upon Malaya itself, as its entrepôt functions have been cut into by the other great ports within the region, especially Jakarta. What has kept Singapore the largest port in Southeast Asia (over 20 million net tons of shipping entered in 1952) is its status as a free port and its strategic location at the western entrance to the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean basin. As a crossroad between the Pacific and Indian oceans, it attracts shipping from great distances. It
[508] also has become an important air center, and
[368] a new airfield is under construction northeast of the city. Finally, the concentration of banking, insurance, light industry, docking, repair, and outfitting facilities have fortified its dominant position.

361 Singapore City was originally laid out
563 with due regard for ethnic quarters.[19] The oldest section of the city, however, has become the business center, but the rest of the older town is a densely populated Chinese section, and much of the newer town to the northeast also is Chinese. Each of these areas is in turn divided on the basis of Chinese clan categories. The European residen-

[18] D. F. Allen, *Report on the Major Ports of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printer, 1951), p. 128.

[19] For a general description of the city see E. H. G. Dobby, "Singapore: Town and Country," *Geographical Review*, January, 1940, and the *Colony of Singapore Annual Report*.

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tial area is primarily on higher ground in the northern part of the city. The University of Malaya is located in Singapore, though plans are being made to move it to Johore Baru on the Malayan mainland. Being largely a Chinese city, Singapore has come to act as a center for the Nan Yang expatriate Chinese, and the city has been chosen as the site of a new Chinese-language regional university.[20] Nevertheless, its air is not that of a Chinese city, nor, for that matter, is it English. Like all great cities, it is cosmopolitan, but it is also culturally rootless, perhaps more so than any of the other great cities of the region.

At the other extreme is Bangkok, most indigenous of the great cities. Founded as the last of a series of "forward capitals"[21] by the Thai in 1783, after the destruction of Ayuthia by the Burmese, the city has never lost its native quality. The soaring rooftrees of *bot* and the spires of stupa stamp the Bangkok skyline with a character of its own. The city is located on the left bank of the Menam Chao Phya within the southernmost great bend of the river some twenty miles from its mouth. Exceptional problems of poor drainage plagued the city from the start, and its numerous *klongs* or canals have given it the rather misleading title of the "Venice of the East."

A Chinese city early appeared to the southeast of the original castle town and in time became part of the central business district. As the lesser *klongs* were filled in to become roads, the city continued to expand. A new city appeared on the northern outskirts of the old, a planned creation built in the reign of Rama VI with broad boulevards and buildings ranging from shocking Victorian variations on Italian Renaissance to more recent battleship modern. The contrast between the façade of modern buildings fronting these boulevards and the stilted, bamboo, thatch, and tin-roofed houses

[20] Richard Butwell, "A Chinese University for Malaya," *Pacific Affairs*, December, 1953.

[21] See reference to Cornish in Spate, *op. cit.*, p. 624.

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Bang Kok

361 behind them is one of the most striking
34 demonstrations of cultural dualism in South-
184 east Asia.

Unlike the other great cities, Bangkok
175 originated as the capital of a land-oriented
361 agrarian state. Its proximity to tidewater
504 was accidental. In 1822 the ship bearing the
177 Crawfurd mission to the Thai court barely
was able to cross the bar at the mouth of the
Menam, then covered by only four feet of
178 water.[22] Its poor harbor and its remoteness
from the major shipping routes of the South
China Sea conspired to retard the develop-
ment of the city as a port until the end of the
nineteenth century and to retain it as an
anachronism in Southeast Asia—a growing
city, nearly great, surely primate, but indig-
enous rather than Western. Nevertheless,
since it was through Bangkok that Western
influences filtered into Thailand, it is a case
of an indigenous capital acting as a revolu-
tionary medium for socioeconomic change.

504 Bangkok is still the least convenient port
of the great cities in Southeast Asia. The bar
361 across the mouth of the Chao Phya was
dredged through only in 1952, and port
facilities are modest as compared with the
other cities. Indeed, most vessels still anchor
in the Bight of Bangkok in the lee of the
island, Kao Hsi Kang, at the mouth of the
Chao Phya and transship their cargoes to
and from river barges and country boats
which link the island with Bangkok. Sur-
prisingly, the freight tonnage handled at
Bangkok is about one-third that of Singa-
pore, although the volume of shipping is
only one-tenth as large. The explanation lies
partly in the large bulk shipments of rice
which form the main export. Partly, also,
there is a lower load factor at Singapore,
since much of the shipping which enters its
harbor is as much dependent on the local
complex of service facilities as on cargo po-
tential. At Bangkok, peripheral as it is to the
main trade routes, few vessels call without
assurances of sizable cargoes.

[22] See J. Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China* (London: H. Colburn & R. Bentley, 1830).

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Bangkok

On the other hand, changes in transportation have elevated Bangkok to a new importance. It lies astride the main air route between Europe and the Far East, and the Australia-Europe services also pass through it. It is now the leading international air center in Southeast Asia, with 42 international departures a week in 1953 as compared with Singapore's 27, and its airport is one of the larger commercial fields in the Orient.

The role of the Southeast Asian great city has been modified by the Pacific war and the granting of independence to Burma, the Philippines, and Indonesia, and partial independence to Vietnam. Five of the six great cities are now capitals of the independent states. Each of these merits the title "link capital"; that is, they are the media through which the newly independent states are linked with the outside world. At the same time, they have begun to assume an increasingly indigenous character. The substitution of Malay for Dutch names and street signs in Indonesia is only one evidence of cultural change. The in-migration of petty officials, tradesmen, and refugees from the beleaguered rural areas has given the urban populations a new and more homogeneous native cast. The fevers of nationalism have made the large minorities more cautious about flaunting their ethnic independence.

[1] [i.e. as compared to the inconvenient port facilities -- Analyst]

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On the other hand, the war also brought increased American influence into the region, and the ubiquitous Coca-Cola sign is one of the symbols of change that sooner or later will be followed by changes in urban facilities and urban organization.

More important, the present period is associated with an increasing intensification of the economic activities of government and a corresponding diminution of foreign enterprise. Political and administrative functions have become increasingly important since the war. Since the main governmental organs are concentrated in the largest centers, the direct influence of the great city upon the country in which it is primate is likewise increasing. Relations between nationalized city and an increasingly money-oriented countryside are becoming more intimate, and the formerly clear-cut cultural distinctiveness of city and country is rapidly becoming blurred. Therefore, the likelihood of the great city's leading a revival of ancient value systems, as some extreme ethnocentrists hope it will, is small. Only one prediction can be made: the days of the culturally alien and ethnically distinct urban center are numbered in Southeast Asia; and a city like Singapore becomes increasingly an anomalous relict of an age now past.

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